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Casey's choices at the CIA

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When President Reagan appointed William Casey director of Central Intelligence in 1981, he selected a man who had several qualifications for the post.

First, during World War II he had served in the Office of Strategic Services, a more modest version of what in time became the CIA.

Second, Mr. Casey knew intimately Washington's bureaucratic byways, having served earlier in several executive government posts.

Third, Mr. Casey, unlike several of his immediate predecessors, had no illusions whatsoever about the Soviet Union.

Fourth, and probably most important, he enjoyed the fullest confidence of President Reagan, an attribute in which many of Mr. Casey's forerunners under other presidents had been notably deficient.

Mr. Casey's first designee to a leading CIA post almost brought him down. As his deputy director for operations, the "chief spook," as he is known at Langley, Mr. Casey appointed not someone from the CIA itself but an "outsider," a businessman who had reportedly done a first-rate job in the 1980 Reagan presidential campaign. The appointee suddenly found himself being investigated for alleged crimes, and before he had even warmed his seat he withdrew, rather than allow himself and the administration to be dragged through the mud.

The following year, 1982, when Adm. Bobby Ray Inman, the legendary intelligence professional, retired as deputy director of Central Intelligence, Mr. Casey, under pressure from Congress, took an "insider," John N. McMahon, then CIA executive director, to replace Mr. Inman. Mr. McMahon resigned his post last week, effective March 29, apparently on his own volition. Succeeding him as second-ranking official at the CIA was another member of the CIA career bureaucracy, Robert M. Gates, the agency's deputy director for intelligence. Prior to this appointment, which requires Senate confirmation, Mr. Gates was chairman of the CIA's National Intelligence Council, which analyzes all information collected by U.S. intelligence agencies.

This replacement of one high CIA official by another demonstrates the tremendous power the CIA career bureaucracy has developed over the years. In addition, career officers are today endowed with an important action base in the House and Senate intelligence oversight committees. These bodies constitutionally outrank the CIA itself because they are empowered to oversee the agency's activities and finances, no matter how secret, how confidential, and how sensitive.

No classification can truly exclude the committee members from knowing, if they want to, whatever the CIA knows and does. In other words, while Mr. Casey nominally is on the top of the Central Intelligence pyramid, his subordinates have inevitably developed a lateral relationship with powerful congressional leaders, some of whom have indicated that they put greater trust in CIA career officers than they do in Mr. Casey himself.

What gives the career officers even more muscle is that, as the director of Central Intelligence, Mr. Casey has, as is the case with any executive-in-chief, a limited timespan for dealing with issues and decisions. There is simply too much to do in an agency like the CIA, even for the director. He must, therefore, select those issues which have a priority for him and in, Mr. Casey's particular situation, for the president.

Such a priority issue for President Reagan is the Strategic Defense Initiative. Whatever one says about Mr. Reagan's putative waffling on various issues and whatever suspicions may be raised among some ultraright commentators about his anti-Communism, Mr. Reagan hasn't yielded an inch on his No. 1 priority, the SDI. The pressures at home and abroad to compromise with the U.S.S.R. have been enormous, but he hasn't budged, perhaps on the assumption that if the United States wins on SDI, all other Soviet-U.S. issues may lose their confrontational significance.

Nicaragua is another priority issue for Mr. Reagan. Thus Mr. Casey has made the president's handful of priorities his own; the CIA career officers can take care of the other issues.

To some extent both men share a belief that when they are right they are right, and they will not be moved. Such an example was afforded the inner Washington world when Mr. Reagan let it be known that he was planning to meet at the November summit in Geneva one-on-one (except for interpreters) with Mikhail Gorbachev. There were protests, entreaties, warnings from many directions that it would be a calamity for Mr. Reagan to meet alone with the Soviet party general secretary. Mr. Reagan paid no attention to all the advice and spent five hours alone with Mr. Gorbachev.

To return to the instant subject, the appointment of Mr. Gates to succeed Mr. McMahon may be a triumph for the CIA career bureaucracy and, indeed, Mr. Gates is probably an excellent appointment, judging by his past record. The point is that, so far as Mr. Casey and his patron are concerned, on those issues which both men regard as top priority they will neither yield nor compromise, regardless of Congress or the CIA bureaucracy.

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